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# Transitions in Primary education (Finland)

Mira Kalalahti

## Keywords

Primary education, vertical and horizontal transitions, school readiness, selective classes, unified comprehensive school

## Text of the article

### 1. Research on transitions in primary education

When commencing primary education (grades 1–6, ISCED 1) after one year of pre-primary education (ISCED 0), children start the compulsory and comprehensive basic education (grades 1–9). Basic education is basically uniform and non-tracking. Nevertheless, since pre-primary education is commonly organized by day-care centers and schools, transition to primary education often means transition from one institution to another. Furthermore, most students change schools when leaving the 6<sup>th</sup> grade (primary education) and beginning the 7<sup>th</sup> grade (lower secondary education). These changes entail **vertical transition** from one institution to another and **horizontal transition** from one set of social practices or community to another. Research has put considerable emphasis on recognizing these two-dimensional transitions and enhancing the empowerment, learning agency and active collaboration of the pupils (Pietarinen, Pyhältö & Soini 2010). In particular, the transitions from pre-education to primary education must be supported by co-operation between different institutions, as addressed in the *National Core Curriculum for Basic Education* (EDUFI 2016).

### 2. Nature of transitions

One year of pre-primary education is compulsory for children from the age of six. Providing a place in pre-primary education free of charge for all children is one of the municipalities' statutory duties. Pre-primary education is commonly organized in private or public day-care centers and public, municipal schools. Primary education is almost always organized in publicly-funded primary schools. Children enter primary education the calendar year they turn seven. All children are allocated a place in a neighborhood school at the beginning of their primary education, but families in larger cities often use their right to apply to a specific school. School choice is commonly made by applying for access to a **class with a special emphasis**. Applying for a class with a special emphasis is possible at three stages: at the beginning of primary education, at the beginning of grade three, and at the beginning of grade seven (Koivuhovi et al. 2018). Parents also have the right to educate their children at home.

Basic education (primary and lower secondary education) is provided in a single-structure system but the transition from primary education (grades 1–6) to lower secondary education (grades 7–9) involves vertical transitions and sometimes moving to new school. Along the vertical transition there are also horizontal transitions, for instance, pedagogical changes. Class teachers normally teach pupils in primary education (grades 1 to 6) and subject teachers in lower secondary education (grades 7 to 9). Lower secondary teaching is mainly subject-specific teaching. The transition from primary to lower secondary education sometimes involves transition from one school building to another. Pupils can also apply for entry to a different lower secondary school from the one that they were appointed to.

### 3. Agency

Primary education transitions involve major changes in the pedagogical practices and environments. The role of the students is gradually guided towards active goal-setting and problem-solving in co-operation with other actors (EDUFI 2016). Pupils are encouraged to work together and to learn to co-operate. Teachers are required to treat children as individuals and help them to proceed according to their own capabilities. Learners should also experience success and joy of learning. As a basic principle, all pupils have the right to educational support (FNAE 2017). This support can be remedial instruction or support for the pupil's special needs. One task of basic education is also to develop the pupils' capabilities for self-assessment (FNAE 2017). The purpose of this is to support the growth of self-knowledge and study skills and to help the pupils to learn to be aware of their progress and learning process.

If families choose to apply for selective classes with a special emphasis, the children need to participate in aptitude tests. Since these tests evaluate aptitudes in different emphasized subjects, for instance in music and sports, children benefit from matching hobbies and family activities. (Kosunen & Seppänen 2015.)

### 4. Parental, family and other social influences

Every child who is a permanent resident of Finland is obliged to undertake compulsory education. The parents and guardians of pupils are responsible for ensuring the pupils complete their compulsory education. School choice has become more common in recent years and parents need to evaluate the primary and lower secondary school options. However, children are usually allocated to nearby schools with a safe and short journey to get to school. (Berisha & Seppänen 2016.)

### 5. Teachers and school personnel

The pre-school teachers evaluate the competence of children to begin primary education and if the child lacks this competence, she/he can stay in pre-school for an additional year.

School authorities are expected to ensure the smooth transition from pre-primary education to primary school. The aim is to transfer all the necessary information concerning learning and the support needed from pre-school teachers to primary school teachers. Teachers discuss the aims, tasks and practices in pre-primary and primary education with the families. The aim is to arrange excursions to primary schools and meetings between the teachers and families.

Fluency of transition requires co-operation between pre-primary and primary teachers and between primary and lower-secondary teachers. Nevertheless, as Karila and Rantavuori have highlighted (2014), preschool and primary school institutions are historically and culturally constructed, and the collaborative process is demanding. This boundary work is constantly being developed.

### 6. Issues

The typical issue for teachers and head teachers is to ensure the fluent transitions from pre-primary education to primary education preschool to school (primary education) and to evaluate the **school readiness** of individual children. Since the educational premises and traditions of pre-primary and primary education differ, there is a constant need to develop and evaluate the practices ensuring the fluent transitions. The single-structure comprehensive school (grades 1–9) has been developed during the 2010s. There is a trend towards the unified comprehensive school, at which pupils study in a large school unit from 1st grade to final 9th grade. According to Sahlsted (2015), the **unified comprehensive schools** seem to lack the ability to ensure horizontal coherence (concerning, for instance, pedagogical

practices), although vertical coherence (coherent transition from one institution to another) is achieved. About one-quarter of comprehensive schools are unified comprehensive schools.

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## Glossary terms

**Class with a special emphasis:** Through their elected education boards, municipalities decide on the allocation of lesson hours at schools in their areas. Classes with a special emphasis function as separate streams within regular municipal schools, and they have more lessons (for instance in music, sports, science, languages or art) than the National Core Curriculum requires. (Varjo, Kalalahti & Silvennoinen 2014.)

**Horizontal transition:** Horizontal transitions are micro-level processes taking place in a school's everyday practices. They are constructed from more implicit nonnormative everyday transitions in pupils' comprehensive school path. Horizontal transitions 'significantly promote or hinder pupils' opportunities to participate in the school community and engage in meaningful learning' (Pietarinen, Pyhältö & Soini 2010, p. 232).

**School readiness:** According to UNICEF (2012), school readiness refers to two characteristic features on three dimensions. The features are 'transition' and 'gaining competencies', and the three dimensions are ready children (focusing on children's learning and development), ready schools (focusing on the school environment along with practices that foster and support a smooth transition by children into primary school and advance and promote the learning of all children), and ready families (focusing on parental and caregiver attitudes and involvement in their children's early learning and development and transition to school).

**Vertical transition:** Vertical transitions refer to those changes that pupils encounter when moving from lower grades to higher ones, or when advancing in learning and knowledge construction. Characteristically these transition "propel the pupil from one meso-system to a new one" (Pietarinen, Pyhältö & Soini 2010, p. 232).

**Unified comprehensive school:** Unified comprehensive school is the new comprehensive school form, in which all pupils from grades 1 to 9 study in the same school building (Sahlsted 2015). The school is specially designed and constructed for this purpose